



U.S. Immigration
and Customs
Enforcement

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News Release

25 charged in international human smuggling ring

Indictment alleges that hundreds of aliens were smuggled illegally

CLEVELAND — An indictment charging 25 defendants with 23 counts of human smuggling was unsealed here today, announced the U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Ohio, Gregory A. White; U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Special Agent-in-Charge Brian M. Moskowitz; and U.S. Postal Inspection Service, Inspector in Charge Robin M. Dagleish.

This morning arrest warrants were executed in: Phoenix, Ariz.; Painesville, Ohio; and Grand Rapids, Mich. A total of 21 individuals were arrested. Other items seized include: \$100,000 U.S. currency, two assault rifles with drum magazines, nine handguns, thousands of rounds of ammunition, numerous fraudulent documents along with the take down of two-drop houses with 20 illegal aliens inside. The indictment also seeks forfeiture of \$1,109,305 in wired cash transfers and seven properties exceeding \$1 million in value.

The 23-count indictment charges that since 1997, Manuel Valdez-Gomez, 53, a native of Mexico and a permanent resident alien living in the Phoenix, Ariz. area, led an alien smuggling organization with members of his immediate family and others. For fees ranging from \$1,800 to \$2,000 each, aliens would be smuggled across the border from Mexico to the Nogales, Ariz. area. During the course of the conspiracy, hundreds of illegal aliens were smuggled into the United States. Once across the border, the conspirators then used motor vehicles and a network of safe houses to transport the smuggled aliens first to Phoenix, Ariz., and thereafter to various interior states, including Ohio.

According to the indictment, Manuel Valdez-Gomez operated an alien smuggling organization, initially utilizing the assistance of relatives and thereafter expanding the operation to include non-relatives who assisted him with fee arrangements to smuggle aliens into the United States. The co-conspirators would use safe houses under their control and operated by Jesus Sosa-Ortiz, Jaime Hernandez-Ornelas, J. Santana Hernandez-Gomez and others, to temporarily situate aliens who had been escorted across the border from Mexico to Nogales, Ariz. During the course of the conspiracy, hundreds of illegal aliens were smuggled into the United States. Manuel Valdez-Gomez arranged to smuggle aliens into the United States and use drivers to transport aliens from the border area to Phoenix, Ariz., and thereafter to ultimate destinations in Ohio, California, Florida, Nevada, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, and other interior states. Drivers transported as

many as 14 aliens on each trip into the interior of the United States, where the aliens would be met by family members or friends who would then pay the drivers the smuggling fee.

Part of the conspiracy supporting the alien smuggling operation provided the illegal aliens with fraudulent alien registration cards, social security cards, and other identification documents, for an additional fee above the fee they were paying to be smuggled into the United States. The U.S. mail was often used to transfer fraudulent documents, information necessary to preparing those fraudulent documents, and payments. Express mail was used by the drivers of loads of illegal aliens as a means of transferring large amounts of cash and money orders back to the co-conspirators in Phoenix, Ariz., thereby lessening the risk, if apprehended, of being identified as an alien smuggler and alien transporter.

The indictment further alleges that drivers and operators of safe houses located in northern states avoided detection and facilitated sending the proceeds of the illegal alien smuggling activities in a structured way to avoid the reporting requirements related to cash transactions greater than \$10,000 and \$3,000. The co-conspirators divided payments of large amounts of money intended for Manuel Valdez-Gomez, which represented the proceeds of alien smuggling, into smaller transactions (often \$2,900) and would further divide payments by wiring them to different individuals in the Phoenix area, knowing the payments were truly intended for Manuel Valdez-Gomez. Between Feb. 9, 2000, and Dec. 9, 2003, large amounts of money representing proceeds of alien smuggling and document vending were wired by Western Union Financial Services Inc. The money was wired from drivers, collectors and safe-house operators to Manuel Valdez-Gomez via a number of individuals who collected the money on his behalf. The following aggregate amounts of proceeds from the illegal activities of the conspiracy were received between Feb. 9, 2000 and Dec. 9, 2003 by the following coconspirators: \$304,499 to Manuel Valdez-Gomez; \$291,926 to Rafael Valdez-Gomez; \$256,855 to Yolanda Sosa; \$164,030 to Patricia Hernandez; \$42,900 to Isidro Aranda; \$32,100 to Jose Valdez; and \$16,995 to Ricardo Aranda-Moreno.

As part of the indictment, forfeiture allegations are included which seek forfeiture seven real properties in the Phoenix area. The value of the real properties exceeds \$1 million. The indictment further states that these properties were used to facilitate the criminal activity charged in the indictment and/or constitute proceeds of that criminal activity. The forfeiture allegations also seek forfeiture of \$1,109,305 in wired cash transfers received by members of the conspiracy charged in Count one of the indictment.

"Criminal organizations that smuggle human beings for profit pose a very real threat to our nation's border security," said Brian M. Moskowitz, special agent-in-charge of the ICE Office of Investigations, which oversees Ohio and Michigan. "Attacking and dismantling smuggling organizations is a critical element in ICE's fight against illegal immigration, and in protecting the integrity of our borders."

ICE Offices of Investigation in the following cities took part in the investigation: Cleveland, Ohio; Phoenix, Ariz.; Detroit, Mich., and Grand Rapids, Mich. In addition, state and local authorities in Ohio assisted with this investigation, including: the Painesville Police Department, the Ohio State Highway Patrol, the Lake County Narcotics Agency, the Lake County Sheriff's Office, and the East Lake Police Department.

The U.S. Postal Investigation Service, the U.S. Border Patrol, and the U.S. Attorney's Offices in Phoenix, Ariz., and Grand Rapids, Mich., also provided assistance. Assistant U.S. Attorneys Phillip J. Trippi, Gary D. Arbeznik and James L. Morford presented the indictment.

An indictment is only a charge and is not evidence of guilt. A defendant is entitled to a fair trial in which it will be the government's burden to prove guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

ICE

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was established in March 2003 as the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security. ICE is comprised of four integrated divisions that form a 21st century law enforcement agency with broad responsibilities for a number of key homeland security priorities.